

Western media coverage of the Arab Spring has carried more than a hint of irrational exuberance. Largely forgotten in all this has been the historical experience of the Color Revolutions, whose initial high hopes yielded less-than-encouraging outcomes.

Faded Colors

Lincoln A. Mitchell

You say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all wanna change the world.

—John Lennon & Paul McCartney

For a few weeks this past January and February, Egypt was the center of the world as hundreds of thousands of young, mostly educated, and (most important for winning attention and accolades in the West) tech-savvy Egyptians came together to peacefully demand their country back. After less than three weeks of these extraordinary and inspiring protests, President Hosni Mubarak resigned, turning the country over to interim military leadership. Since similar demonstrations had brought down Tunisia's autocratic leader, Zine El Abidine

Ben Ali, only a few weeks earlier, and since the unrest quickly spread to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere in the region, including even Iran, it became common in the West to group these phenomena as a new Arab Awakening, or a region-spanning democratic revolution. Such perceptions were greatly aided by powerful images from Egypt, for example, of peaceful demonstrators being attacked by government-supported thugs, of ordinary Egyptians demanding their rights and freedoms, even of Christian Egyptians forming a human chain to protect their Muslim countrymen at prayer. They have been aided, as well, by the media and the cadences of political opportunism. A *Time* magazine headline shortly after Mubarak's resignation, for instance, proclaimed "Iran, Egypt Caught in the Churning of a Mideast Democracy Wave" (Tony Karon, February 15, 2011). On the eve of Mubarak's resignation, President Obama proclaimed, "We are

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Anti-government protestors celebrate inside Tahrir Square after the announcement of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's resignation on February 11, 2011.

witnessing history unfold." In short, there is now a widespread view in the West, a view almost unanimously held in the less cynical United States, that we have witnessed something very special in Egypt that will lead to lasting and significant political change throughout the Middle East.

These developments, however, are not unanimously viewed in a positive light. Some in the West see the rioting crowds on the streets of Cairo as a harbinger of a takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood, an Arabic translation of a Persian script that played out in Iran circa 1978–79. Conservatives have most frequently expressed this view, not least among them (albeit most irrationally) Glenn Beck, who said that what will happen in Egypt after Mubarak "will be very similar to what happened in Iran." Several conservative politicians, such as former U.S. Senator and potential presidential candidate Rick Santorum, have warned that elections in Egypt will lead to "sharia law." A few profess not to know which way the wind will blow but

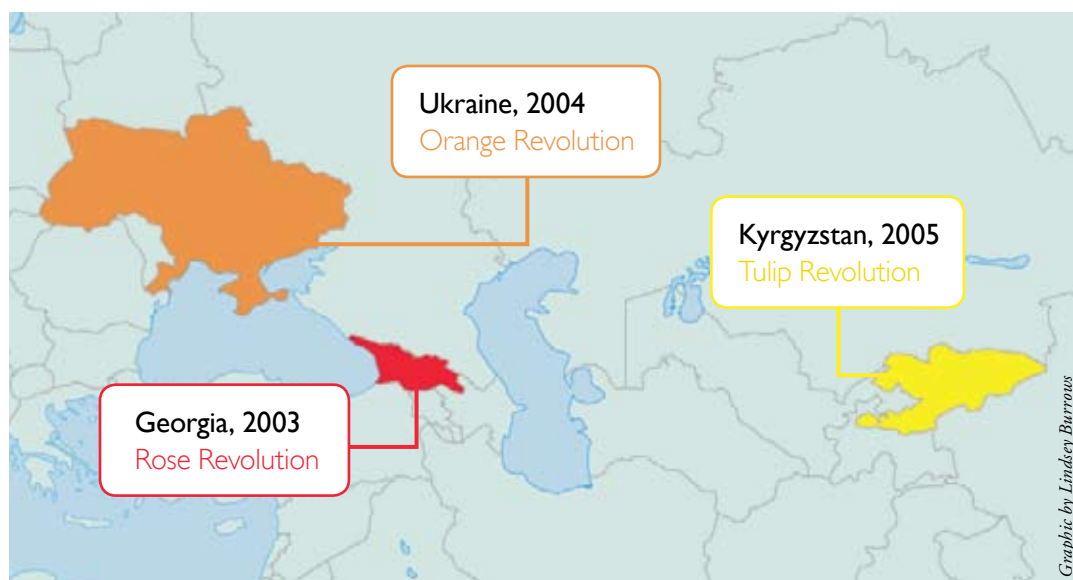
take the democracy and Islamist poles as their guideposts. Thus, Roger Cohen asserted, "The core issue in Egypt can be boiled down to this: are we witnessing Tehran 1979 or Berlin 1989?"¹

This sort of thing may make for an attractive op-ed, but Cohen's analysis is way off the mark. Neither of these analogies is right for Egypt. We should not, however, be surprised by such foul-ball punditry in a media climate that rewards untutored opinionators for making flash judgments. Nobody has wanted to offer airtime, bandwidth or column inches for somebody to say that the events in Egypt, while extraordinary, might presage a less than extraordinary outcome.

It's a shame, because ordinary is precisely the most likely outcome in Egypt and in most of the countries in the Middle East that are now seething with popular revolt. History, recent and otherwise, bears witness to the fact

¹Cohen, "Tehran 1979 or Berlin 1989?" *New York Times*, February 7, 2011.

Color Revolutions in the former Soviet Union



that revolutions don't occur simply because thousands of people come out to the streets, and that, even when revolutions do occur, they rarely lead to democracy. Consider the track record of the so-called Color Revolutions of the past decade, a record the media has somehow managed to forget altogether amid its ecstasies over the new Arab Awakening.

It was only between five and eight years ago that demonstrations similar to those that have occurred in Egypt swept parts of the former Soviet Union. At the time, many thousands of peaceful demonstrators clogged the streets of Tbilisi, Kyiv and Bishkek to demand change and democratic reform in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. The West saw these Color Revolutions, as they came to be known, as undeniable heralds of liberal democracy. That's not how things turned out—at least not in any simple way in Ukraine, probably not even in the long run in Georgia, and not even a little bit in Kyrgyzstan. The excitement of January 2004 in Georgia and February 2005 in Ukraine seems almost quaint today, as both of those countries have fallen considerably short of their democratic promise. In Kyrgyzstan, where a corrupt authoritarian regime was ousted peacefully in 2005, a regime at least as corrupt and authoritarian replaced it. And the march of Color Revolutions came to an abrupt halt in 2006.

The three Color Revolutions show us three possible ways that seeming Middle Eastern democratic breakthroughs can fizzle out in only a few years. In Ukraine, after Viktor Yuschenko became President following attempts by his opponent Viktor Yanukovich to steal the election in 2004, many had expectations similar to those for Egypt today. Yuschenko was publicly committed to reform and democracy, as well as to the modernization of the Ukrainian economy, but his efforts were largely unsuccessful throughout his six-year presidency. Political opposition to his government as well as dissension within it remained strong throughout his term, weakening Yuschenko politically and making it hard for him and his allies to pass their ambitious reform proposals. And when the Ukrainian economy began to suffer following the global economic crisis of summer 2008, Yuschenko's popularity plummeted further. Ukrainian voters soundly rejected him at the polls in 2010, giving him less than 6 percent of the vote. In the runoff, Yuschenko's erstwhile Orange Revolution ally, Yulia Tymoshenko, lost to the same Viktor Yanukovich whose attempts to steal the 2004 election led to the Orange Revolution in the first place. Since coming into office, Yanukovich has sought to reverse much of the liberalization of Ukrainian society that had begun during Yuschenko's presidency. That does not

make what he is doing anti-democratic, for it appears to be reasonably popular and little if any of it violates the constitution, but it certainly does make Ukraine a very different place from what liberal Western publics expected it to become back in 2004.

In Kyrgyzstan, the story has been much simpler. The regime that came to power following the 2005 Tulip Revolution turned out to be as least as authoritarian and corrupt as the regime it had replaced. Led by President Kurambek Bakiev, it made little effort to conceal its corrupt nature and lasted only five years. Now, ironically, hope resides in the new regime that ousted the Tulip Revolution regime. It may yet make Kyrgyzstan more democratic, but this, like much else in the country, remains to be seen.

Georgia's failure to live up to Western expectations regarding democracy followed yet another path. In Georgia, unlike in Kyrgyzstan, the new government was significantly less corrupt than its predecessor and evinced a genuine commitment to economic reform. It wasn't too long, however, before democracy dropped away from the government's true priorities. Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili has built a strongman regime that, while far from being a dictatorship, bears little resemblance to democracy. There is limited political competition, almost complete dominance by one political party, and *de facto* restrictions of press freedoms and the judicial and legislative branches of government. No institution in Georgian society can claim much genuine independence from the powerful executive.

What It All Doesn't Mean

Thus by 2010, five years after the last of the post-Soviet Color Revolutions, the democratic potential so widely touted just a few years before had dissipated in all three countries. What can we conclude from the desultory history of the once-vaunted Color Revolutions?

The main lesson seems to be that ousting a non-democratic leader, once his time is up, is surprisingly easy but is not in itself particularly important for democratic development. Given the size of Egypt and the length and

brutality of his rule, Mubarak, like Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia and Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan, left office relatively quickly and peacefully. (Libya, Bahrain and other Middle Eastern countries, of course, have followed different paths in 2011, but that only shows, once again, the limits of all analogies.) Building democracy is a far more difficult and chancy prospect even after a corrupt or authoritarian leader resigns. As P.J. O'Rourke once memorably put it, "It is one thing to burn down the shithouse, another to install plumbing."

Another major lesson of the Color Revolution is that continuity, even after an apparent regime change, is a very powerful political force. Mubarak is gone, but the Egyptian army and its vast patronage network are not, suggesting that a year from now the country may look a lot less different than those celebrating democracy there would like to think.

Those seeking to understand or craft policy toward post-Mubarak Egypt should keep these two lessons in mind. There are enormous political spaces between Islamic theocracy, liberal democracy and authoritarian rule by a military strongman. Egypt will almost certainly end up somewhere in between those ideal type descriptions. The regime will probably be a unique hybrid of democracy and authoritarianism—in other words, a mixed regime with Egyptian characteristics. It will have secular and religious features and structures, and it will almost certainly retain a strong role for the military bureaucracy, if only because, as things stand now, there are simply no other cadres in the country capable of running it.

This means that newspaper headlines, statements by politicians and inspirational images from January and February 2011 notwithstanding, we should be cautious about referring to the events in Egypt as a revolution. Using this term any time large groups of people come to the streets and oust their leaders dumps down the meaning of the word and confuses it with terms like coup, ouster or secession—all of which may prove to be more useful ways to understand what has just happened in Egypt. Recall that the Color Revolutions also appeared to be revolutions as they were happening; the crowds of people shivering in the Kiev or Tbilisi winters

were just as inspiring as the images we have seen from Egypt. But as time has passed, it is clear that “revolution” is a very generous interpretation of what happened in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia.

Just as the history of dominant-party systems in Georgia contributed to the development of yet another one-party system after that country’s Rose Revolution, or just as the kleptocratic behavior of the Akaev regime in Kyrgyzstan was quickly adapted by the new regime following that country’s Tulip Revolution, so, too, is it likely that powerful institutional actors in Egypt, most likely the military, will continue to assert significant influence on the country’s future. It is also likely that the Muslim Brotherhood, whose strength is not as great as many conservative observers think, will play a role. The experience of the Color Revolutions suggests that strong democratic institutions, rule of law, and press and civic freedoms will not come easily to Egypt, not just, or necessarily, because Egypt has unique “Muslim country” problems, but because these things have not come easily anywhere in recent years. Indeed, they did not come easy to Britain, France or America, if one stands far enough back in time to take a candid look. Even if they do emerge, democratic institutions in the new Egypt will be as incomplete, fragile and flawed as they are in much of the post-1989 post-authoritarian world.



AP Photo

**The last time protesters ousted an Arab autocrat:
November 4, 1964, Khartoum, Sudan.**

Perhaps the best analogies for Egypt in this regard are two other Arab cases of regime change: Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution, now all but collapsed, and the imposed revolution in Iraq. Lebanon’s promise has been broken by U.S. timidity and inattention, Lebanon’s own demons, and an aggressive proxy strategy via Hizballah from Iran, aided by Syria. Lebanon is one of the few Arab countries that had real political parties, real political institutions, a cosmopolitan culture and a vibrant press and intellectual life. Its prospects for democratic development were relatively good, yet the democratic opening seems to have failed. As for Iraq,

the drama is far from over. If in a year's time Egypt's political culture looks like Iraq's today, we would probably judge that as a positive outcome. But while the U.S. government exerted too little post-revolutionary pressure in Lebanon, it obviously exerted a great deal, if not too much, in Iraq. (Clearly, this is not an option in Egypt.) The lesson here is not that democracy is impossible in the Arab world; it isn't. It is that the road to democracy can be an extremely difficult one for societies with no experience of it, as recent history in the former Soviet Union also demonstrates.

That points directly to another reason that we should bear only temperate expectations for Egypt's future. The regimes overthrown during the past decade in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan were far less authoritarian and repressive than Mubarak's, and in all three Color Revolutions the opposition was associated with the West. The United States, in particular, was seen as having played an outsized and positive role in those events. In Egypt, on the other hand, the United States is seen, accurately enough, as the patron of the authoritarian regime just brought to its knees. The magnitude of U.S. assistance to Egypt and the willingness of the United States to turn a blind eye to its human rights violations during the Mubarak era are not lost on the demonstrators in Egypt, or elsewhere in the region. What this means is that America will have less influence as both aid and as model in post-upheaval Egypt than it had in Georgia, Ukraine or even Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, given the extent to which U.S. policy ended up facilitating the movement away from democracy in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, this may end up proving helpful to Egypt's democratic aspirations.

U.S. friendliness with Mubarak's Egypt also means that the Obama Administration should be very careful not to get out in front in pressing U.S. democracy assistance aid. It may not be welcome, and the mere fact of its being offered publicly may enable those who do not have the interests of democracy at heart to exploit it for their own ends. We would be wise to provide help only if the new Egyptian authorities or Egyptian democracy activists explicitly request it.

Egypt's post-Mubarak government will not have been entirely immune to U.S. influence, however. Washington retains significant clout

with the Egyptian military through what can be fairly called the power of the purse and through personal relationships with numerous Egyptian military leaders. But that influence must be deployed discreetly if it is not to backfire. If the United States comes to be seen to be the partner and protector of a new military government that is perceived as moving too slowly or not at all toward a more decent and open political system, then U.S. influence in Egypt in the long term will gravely suffer. Given the poor reputation of the American connection, it could also damage the high regard with which many Egyptians still hold their military.

The Wages of Clientalism

Although the Obama Administration didn't create the U.S. policy toward Egypt in place during the last days of the Mubarak era, the policy unraveled on Obama's watch, thus presenting his Administration with a difficult test. Faced with a long-time client who was rapidly becoming too costly to keep, the United States received yet another reminder of the perils of clientalism. Those perils describe a pattern: The longer the client relationship persists, the more U.S. influence declines. Most clients can never fully be controlled even when they are insecure and needy, but when their political survival is threatened they have even fewer inducements to follow the advice of their patron, as demonstrated by Mubarak's infamous final two telephone calls with President Obama.

This resembled the progression of events in Georgia. As that country inched closer to war in 2008, its government ignored a counsel of caution from Washington, thinking that its close personal ties were strong enough to be the Georgian tail that wagged the American dog.

Clientalism, of course, is understood to serve the interests of stability, and it can—for a while. What we often forget, however, is that stability is a good thing if it blocks change for the worse, but not so good if it blocks change for the better. When the negative seems far more likely than the positive, as is often the case in the Middle East, patrons are tempted to entertain the illusion that the client is more stable than he really is, and that the patron is uniquely qualified to

guarantee stability. This can give rise to a very dangerous dynamic in which the client claims that only he can prevent the deluge (which he skillfully exaggerates) and in which the patron believes him, because he just might be right. The patron thus ends up with a policy whose increasing inflexibility is matched only by its decreasing influence over the client.

The U.S.-Georgia relationship before 2008 provides the perfect example of this process of policy ossification. What American leaders said back then about President Saakashvili, who was a less authoritarian U.S. client back then, resonates with what some American leaders said about Mubarak only a short time ago. Clearly, Mubarak's status as a long-time American client contributed to the statements of friendship and support from an Administration that initially seemed to be having trouble appreciating the scope and direction of events in Egypt. This explains Vice President Joseph Biden's January 27 refusal to refer to Mubarak as a dictator, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's February 5 remark to the Munich Security Conference: "He [Mubarak] has given a clear message to his government to lead and support this process of transition." This latter was a remark so absurd on its face that Secretary Clinton appeared in the eyes of sentient Egyptians to be either a liar

or a fool. Indeed, it easily beats anything said publicly by a Bush Administration official on the cusp of the Georgia-Russia War.

As accident-prone as the process of letting go was for the Administration, what comes next may be even more treacherous. The cavalier nature with which Administration officials at the highest levels have spoken about Egypt's transition to democracy raises the concern that it does not yet really understand either Egyptian politics or the potential American role in making Egypt more democratic. Comments like President Obama's remark that "nothing less than genuine democracy will carry the day" are essentially platitudes reflecting the political needs of the moment, but they could morph into catastrophe if they are a reflection of what he really believes the United States can accomplish. Given President Obama's admission that he wanted his rhetoric to be out in front of his private analysis of the risks involved in the Egyptian maelstrom, there is a good chance they aren't a sign of what he really thinks. Whatever flaws we may have noticed in the Obama foreign policy thus far, the disease of ideological thinking is not among them. That is as good a reason as any to think that, in contrast to the Color Revolutions, we may get it right this time. 🌍

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